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Transformation in Rotherham

‘It takes a village to raise a child’

Think piece from the 2019 Public service: state of transformation report

The challenge

Imagine this. It's 26 August 2014. You are a business support officer working in the education service, a key function within the children and young people's service (CYPS) at Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council. Before this day you were a hard-working officer, in what you

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believed was a high-performing section of a well-run organisation. You were entitled to this opinion. Why? Because the secondary schools you support had for a while now been educating their young people to achieve higher levels of GCSE passes at A-C grades (including English and maths) than national averages. However, your perception, alongside much of the rest of the world's, is shattered on this day, when news breaks of the Professor Jay report into child sexual exploitation.

The report pertained to the findings of an inquiry commissioned by the then RMBC chief executive, following increasing intelligence of an unusually high prevalence of abuse over a 16-year period, from 1997 to 2013. The report differed from previous related works – it shone a light on an uncomfortable truth, that there was a race dimension to the sorry tale. According to Professor Jay's inquiry, a conservative estimate of 1,400 girls, British white in ethnicity, had been sexually exploited throughout the period by grooming gangs of Pakistani heritage. The report landed with the outrage one should have expected and this triggered an Ofsted inspection of children's services which, on 19 November 2014, confirmed that the service was inadequate (bottom six

per cent in the country), meaning there were 'widespread systemic failings' across the system.

In the wake of this, then Secretary of State for Education, Nicky Morgan MP, appointed a commissioner, Malcolm Newsam (now CBE), and Eric Pickles, her counterpart at Communities and Local Government, appointed Louise Casey (now Dame) to lead a corporate governance inspection as there was evidence of failings beyond CYPS, extending to senior officers in other directorates and elected members.

I was appointed as strategic director of CYPS by Commissioner Newsam and an appointments committee of elected members, supported by a new interim chief executive Jan Ormandroyd, and I began work with the council on 1 January 2015. The scale of the challenge was exacerbated by the publication of Louise Casey's report following the corporate governance inspection, which confirmed that, in her view, the council was not fit for purpose. Accepting these findings, Secretary of State Pickles relieved the council of its statutory responsibilities and vested powers for running the council in six commissioners, led by Sir Derek Myers and including previously appointed Commissioner Newsam.

‘It takes a village to raise a child’

In my view never a truer proverb has been spoken. Here, Nelson Mandela articulated in one short sentence how a whole-systems approach is required to ensure that children are safe, that they thrive throughout childhood and make a transition to become adults who make a positive contribution to society.

My experience in Trafford MBC and Derbyshire County Council, and knowledge of effective systems in North Yorkshire, Lincolnshire, Leeds, Kensington and Chelsea, Hackney and Essex, juxtaposed with professional training and development at the National College for Leaders of Schools and Children’s Services, helped to give me an unswerving focus on the system, as opposed to the work within individual silos.

Two approaches were used to drive an agenda for continuous improvement. ‘Appreciative inquiry’¹ helped us to identify strengths across the system to galvanise a collective response to the many failings over nearly two decades; whilst Professor John Kotter’s eight-step change model was a useful reference point for a sequence of critical work packages. Using the model’s headings below, I explain how transformation became a reality for the council and children’s services within it.

1. Create a sense of urgency

For leaders in Rotherham, this was probably the easiest of the eight steps.

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Rotherham MBC family workers and social workers were constantly vilified and, in some instances, spat at on doorsteps and there were numerous individuals and support groups seeking intervention to help exploitation victims and survivors overcome their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, there was a powerful compulsion for the perpetrators of the horrific abuse to be brought to justice.

I recall being sat in my office sketching a spider diagram to capture the multifarious complex issues we were faced with on one seemingly intractable web. Even though the reality was different, there were days early on when it seemed nothing was going well – even the simple things. For example, I often tell the story of a diary entry that should have read ‘gold command training’ but was inserted as ‘gold commando training’ – as a result I nearly didn’t show up for that one!

In the first few weeks, securing early wins was a task in itself as the (understandable) anger in the community and the vitriolic response across all popular social media platforms served as a constant reminder of the council’s failings.

In sum, in modern social policy history, there was no greater ‘sense of urgency’ than the one required in the case of the Rotherham abuse scandal.

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2. Build a guiding coalition

The ‘authorising environment’ of an excellent team of expert commissioners and a newly formed ‘advisory cabinet’ of able, committed elected officials, provided a bedrock for building a coalition for change.

A key ministerial decision to move to all-out elections provided much-needed political stability in the medium term and the formulation of a new council structure. Key appointments, such as a cadre of new corporate directors and a new chief executive, Sharon Kemp (succeeding Commissioner – now Dame – Stella Manzie), helped strengthen the council's core performance. High-profile, critical historical failings such as taxi licencing were by now already transformed, following exceptional work by Commissioner (now Dame) Mary Ney.

Meanwhile statutory partnerships, such as the health and wellbeing board, local safeguarding children's board, adult safeguarding board and community safety partnership, were strengthened. With the support of central government departments (CLG and Department for Education), these developments are credit to many actors across the local system, including South Yorkshire Police, the health economy, schools, the voluntary sector and the citizens of Rotherham, notably the victims and survivors of child sexual exploitation, who stepped up to help us all remedy the wrongs of the past.

3. Form a strategic vision and initiatives

One of the most common areas for development emerging from staff surveys relates to the (lack of) organisational vision. It was therefore a key imperative but one that required ownership at all levels.

I was fortunate to be among people who were agitating for excellence

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and, inspired by my very talented new senior team and the 'authorising environment' mentioned above, a vision for excellence was crafted for consultation. Any highly aspirational vision is a gamble as one has to achieve a balance between 'stretch' targets and the art of the possible. Given the efficacy within the leadership, staff team and partners, I believed that working towards being regarded as 'outstanding' within four years was achievable. So this was the proposition put before the partnership and accepted, together with feedback to hone the wording as follows:

The vision of Rotherham's children's services is to be rated outstanding by 2018. We will pursue three objectives:

- a)** All children to be safe from harm;
- b)** All children to start school healthy and ready to learn for life; and
- c)** All young people and their families to be ready for the world of work

This will result in people being proud to come from Rotherham.

This vision set the tone for rapid transformation as throughout the journey not even good was good enough. It became the source of tension at times but as the late Henry Ford said, 'Quality means doing it right when no-one is looking', and in my view the children of Rotherham deserved no less than the excellent quality and service standards which I would expect for my own children.

Initiatives were aplenty but getting the business basics in place was a top priority. The structure of the service was addressed to ensure proficiency of service response,

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resulting in a new early help service connected to partners in localities and a sharper focus on social work compliance initially. Then we moved on to developing high-quality, effective commissioning and spans of management control that facilitated a strong 'line of sight' to the front line of practice. The forensic eye of central government meant that governance had to be strong, overseen by a number of boards instituted to monitor the impact of initiatives and pace of change.

3a. Communicate the vision

I hope Professor Kotter (and readers) will forgive me for adding an adjunct at this point.

Another popular, often legitimate gripe of the staff survey respondent is the lack of communication within organisations. We often get our communications wrong believing that a one-off email does the trick.

I grew up in the 1970s and 80s believing that a 'Mars a day helped me to work rest and play'. Why? Because the Mars confectionery company told me repeatedly throughout the day using a variety of modes – TV, radio, newspapers, billboards etc. Great communicators recognise the importance of repetition and that as humans we all have different learning styles. According to Honey and Mumford I am an 'activist/ pragmatist' which means I learn best by doing. Others prefer 'theoretical/ reflective' approaches to learning.

I believed that the strategy to communicate our vision widely needed to recognise human psychological preferences and so a variety of methods were deployed, through written, verbal and interactive tools. Opportunities to reinforce the ultimate goal were seldom missed and over time, using appreciative inquiry aided by social media to celebrate successes, our staff and partners started to believe that our vision could become a reality for Rotherham children.

4. Enlist a volunteer army

My current mentor, Jo Miller, Chief Executive of Doncaster MBC, often quotes Margaret Mead who said, 'never doubt that a small group

of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'. This I believe is true. However, any such group requires a broader church of support ultimately if they are to galvanise a movement.

Our volunteer army included some unlikely volunteers such as KPMG Foundation Trust and their visionary CEO, Jo Clunie, who worked with us to develop the largest child sexual exploitation prevention project in the country – 'Reachout' – in conjunction with Barnardo's.

Others included Rotherham's thriving voluntary sector which boasted 49,000 volunteering positions, our children and young people's fora, our peers across Yorkshire and Humber region and beyond, the Local Government Association, the regulator as part of its improvement work, and the growing network of survivors of exploitation who, through expertise gained in objectionable circumstances, were stepping forward to help us enhance the quality of our practices.

5. Enable action by removing barriers

Barriers that serve to prohibit change exist in all transformation programmes. Recognising the types of barriers and responding to them quickly are essential in my view.

Some barriers are easy to identify and tackle such as the physical environment – office accommodation, service delivery points, IT equipment etc. However, some such as lack of confidence, mindset, and quiet subliminal resistors are harder to both identify and address.

A positive mindset helped us to win the psychological war against a small minority working to undermine the transformation underway. By this stage our 'army' had embraced the mission objectives and were hungrily exploring the art of the possible.

'An impressive corporate response' (highlighted by Ofsted), including excellent access to legal, HR, finance, IT and property services, enabled us to create conditions for quality of practice to thrive, ranging from excellent office accommodation and the procurement of a new IT system for our staff, through to excellent service-user facilities such as 'The Journey' – a new safe space for our care leavers.

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‘Optimism is the faith that leads to improvement, nothing can be achieved without hope and confidence.’

exploring the art of the possible. The words of Helen Keller below, epitomises the attitude prevalent across the movement at the time:

6. Generate short term wins

A commitment to appreciative inquiry helps keep the positive in clear view. Not everything in Rotherham’s children’s services was broken. The outcomes achieved in early years was impressive, as was the trajectory of improvement for pupils in the educational primary phase and the outcomes consistently achieved for secondary phase learners.

I never believed that people had come to work to do a bad job in Rotherham in the past and as a team we were keen to ensure this was acknowledged. Following focus groups with staff and partners, after a few weeks we attained quick wins such as:

- supernumerary agency resource for frontline workers to reduce caseloads;
- additional high-quality interim management to improve access to support and supervision;
- joint protocols across statutory agencies; and
- new joint senior posts with health, signalling a commitment to partnership working

Key milestones achieved relatively early on include the success of ‘Operation Clover’, a partnership between South Yorkshire Police and the council, which led to the conviction of 13 sex criminals in 2016 who were sentenced to a total of almost 200 years in prison. In the same year, the council secured an ‘outstanding’ Ofsted inspection outcome for its children’s disabled breaks facility. This was a first for the authority and a clear statement of intent.

7. Sustain acceleration

The vision became a critical focal point for the system of leaders and it was this that kept us improving at pace.

Key personnel changes in the ‘authorising environment’ saw the establishment of seven (game-changing) tests by the outgoing Commissioner Newsam, which focused on a wider council response and the appointment of a new Executive Commissioner, councillor Patricia Bradwell, together with a practice improvement partner in the form of Lincolnshire Council, spearheaded by its director of children’s services, Debbie Barnes.

Coaching psychology sat at the heart of this phase, with practice partner colleagues working alongside our own dedicated workforce to reflect on practice quality, which was a key test. The leadership team all had access to an external coach, Julia Morrison, who helped the team to build resilience and maintain a high pace of improvement.

Our unrelenting focus on quality saw the introduction of ‘restorative practice’, ‘signs of safety’ and ‘social pedagogy’² and together with practice quality standards developed by our frontline practitioners in early help and social care, the ‘Rotherham Family Model’ was born.

Signs of safety + restorative approaches + social pedagogy = Rotherham Family Model!

Juxtaposed with this, a key test in establishing a compelling offer to the workforce focused our attention on staff recruitment and retention and the resultant action led to a reduction in agency usage of family social workers from 44 per cent to 16 per cent, as well as in vacancies, turnover and sickness absence.

Then there was the direct work we as senior leaders did with our young people. An example is the looked after children council’s ‘ban a bin liner’ campaign – a campaign to eradicate the appalling practice of children in care being moved, often at short notice, and having to put their belongings in a bin liner as if it were rubbish. To make the point, they staged a fashion show with

clothes made out of bin liners for leaders to model, including yours truly! On another occasion they had us dressed up in tutus as we took part in a dance routine designed by the young people at their 'Pride of Rotherham' awards evening. You need to know that I banned social media activity for this, and all pictures taken remain classified to this day!

8. Institute change

Regarding sequencing, there is a slight flaw in this model I believe (sorry Professor Kotter) and why I tend to allow for flexibility when applying theoretical concepts.

Change is often iterative and, in this case, we were on a roller coaster ride. The trajectory of improvement was not linear and at times we were derailed. An example is the performance of three of our residential care homes, which were rated inadequate by Ofsted at a time when we were making good progress across the wider child protection system. Albeit relatively early on in our journey, these inspection outcomes served to undermine confidence and, as professional leaders, we had to spend much time with elected members, trade unions and others to explain the rationale behind our judgments, the outcomes in the context of the wider systems work underway, and the reason why in the end we recommended that the provisions be decommissioned.

However, overall the changes we had made became more and more embedded as we pursued our vision

and continually asked ourselves 'would this be good enough for my own child?' at every turn. We were preparing for our re-inspection through focusing on protecting our children and supporting them to achieve their full potential.

On 6 November 2017, we got the call advising us that the following day our four-week Ofsted re-inspection was about to commence. When I announced this to the team in our 'engine room', there was a real sense of 'bring it on' amongst the staff – it was their time to shine. As with all inspections there were tense moments and much discourse with inspectors regarding where we were on our journey. As one can imagine, convincing the inspection team that we had made the leap out of the inadequate category was a daunting prospect and a claim which would only stand up if we were able to show them evidence that the quality of our practice had improved.

At the end of a gruelling four weeks, inspectors confirmed that the service was 'good overall with outstanding features' (care leavers, adoption support, and response to complex abuse), placing the service in the top 16 per cent nationally. When the report was published in January 2018, we celebrated hard. My deputy director of children's services, Mel Meggs (now strategic director of children's services at Kirklees) and I threw a party for the staff and word on the street is we are still actually paying our credit cards off. But you know what? They were worth it!

Ian Thomas CBE

Ian Thomas CBE is currently Chief Executive of the Royal Borough of Kingston upon Thames and has 33 years' experience in the public, voluntary and private sector. Previous roles include periods as Chief Executive of Lewisham and, before that, Strategic Director of Rotherham Borough Council's Children and Young People's Services, where he was responsible for the transformation of the service following the child sexual exploitation scandal which rocked the town. In recognition of his work, Ian was made a CBE in the 2019 New Year's Honours list.

This piece does little justice to the hard work and emotional investment of the Rotherham faithful and, whilst never forgetting the past, the town should feel justly proud of what has been achieved in recent times. I would like to pay tribute to everyone who helped make possible the transformation I have described above, whilst also acknowledging the continuing impact of abuse on those who suffered.

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¹ For more information on appreciative inquiry, see <https://hbswk.hbs.edu/archive/the-art-of-appreciative-inquiry>

² For examples and further information on these approaches, see <https://www.leeds.gov.uk/residents/learning-and-job-opportunities/childrens-social-work-innovation>, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/signs-of-safety-practice-in-childrens-services-an-evaluation> and <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/policy-practice/head-heart-hands/what-social-pedagogy>